

Facing page: the Palace of Mirrors from 'Monuments Modernes de la Perse' by P. Coste, 1867. The building, which was situated on the south bank of the Zayandeh river near the Khaju bridge, survived until c1914. Its timber structure,

covered in mirror mosaic, is typical of Safavid secular architecture, and contrasts with the more permanent heavy brick architecture of the mosques. An exterior view of the building and its relationship to the bridge are shown on p289.

# WHY ISFAHAN?

'Isfahan nisf-i-Jahan: Isfahan is half the world', goes a Persian saying—a cry of wonder, which sums up the emotion experienced by travellers to the city during its golden age. Even today it remains, like Rome or Leningrad, one of the great cities of the world. That alone would be a good enough reason to devote a whole number of *The Architectural Review* to Isfahan. Yet there are other more prosaic, but also more compelling reasons. Iranian civilisation, unlike its European or American counterpart, still retains a remarkable degree of cohesion which seems to thrive on the complexities of small-scale institutions such as abound in the bazaar. The sense of unity imposed by Islam and especially by its mystical branch, Sufism, still pervades much of every day life and thought. Thus the craftsman continues to hold an honoured place in Iran, not for his intrinsic worth like the European artist, but because he is making something useful to which he also adds beauty for the glory of God. Science and the scientific approach has never attained the predominance which it holds on Western thought, because knowledge has remained the servant of the divine gift of wisdom.

If the East today has much to teach the West, we as Westerners, who have learnt from our mistakes, can send out warning signals. For Iran is in danger of forsaking its own culture by allowing Western

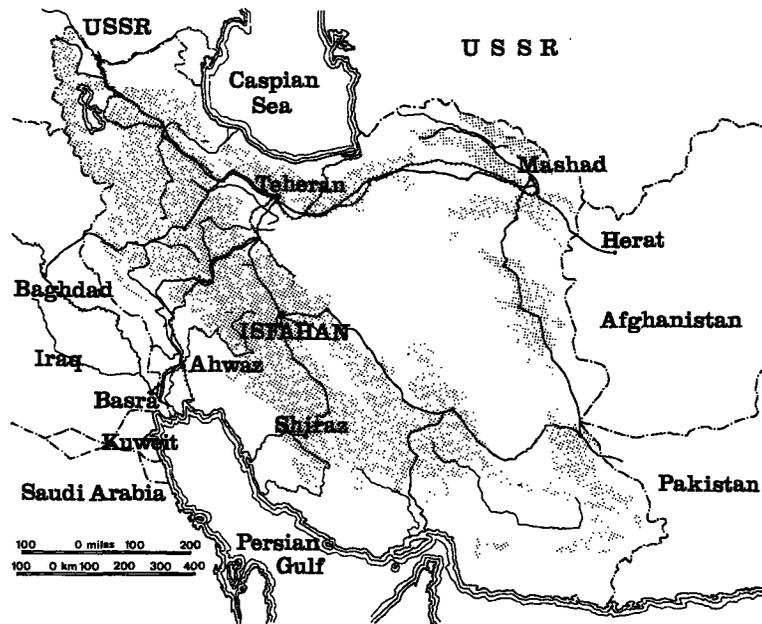
influences to infiltrate and gradually destroy its traditional values. One example, which is fully discussed in this number, is the abandonment of the courtyard plan in favour of the European-type block. Another is the proposal to import a capital-intensive building technology when Iran already possesses both labour and a labour-intensive building technology. To continue along this road will turn Iran, as it has turned other parts of the Middle East, into a cheap America and Iranians into *ersatz* Americans. Throughout this number we offer our criticism in a constructive spirit and in a mood of deep concern, because we genuinely admire the achievements of Iran and firmly believe that Iranians must remain proud of being Iranians. We believe that there is no better example than Isfahan to illustrate the traditional qualities which are still there in plenty, as well as the external threats which are now menacing the city with destruction. We begin, therefore, with a brief historical introduction which also explains the structure of the city. For those who do not know Isfahan, and this includes the majority of our readers, there follows an extended and profusely illustrated section which attempts to identify the character and some of the quality of the city's key areas: the bazaar, the Maidan, the Chahar Bagh and the river. Since it would have been difficult, indeed

undesirable, to deal with these areas from a purely romantic point of view, the reader will not only 'know' Isfahan by the time he reaches the end of this section, but will have become aware of some of the city's major problems. In other words he will be ready for the polemics of the central article, 'Can Isfahan survive?' which criticises some of the recent policies and sees hope in others, placing the city firmly in its regional context.

Having analysed and criticised, we go on to be constructive. We support the proposals for the restoration of the Maidan, prepared by a group of visiting Italian architects, and we suggest a number of 'remedies' for two areas devastated by the bulldozer and for the traditional courtyard house, featured in all its variety and richness, which is increasingly being abandoned in favour of the modern suburban flat. These 'remedies', which include suggestions for the streets and the public garden, should in no sense be regarded as designs, but as ideas to stimulate thought and discussion. They are followed by the important proposals to rehabilitate part of an old quarter—proposals which aim expressly at retaining the existing population and which are put forward by an Iranian architect who has so far been supported by the authorities. We conclude with a summary of imperatives which must, in our opinion, be carried out if Isfahan is to be saved. Underlying these imperatives are principles which apply not only to Isfahan, but to every historic city in Iran.

Facing page: historic photographs taken c1870 by Ernst Hoeltzer, a German engineer and employee of the Persian Telegraph Department who lived most of his life in the Armenian quarter of Isfahan. A pigeon tower which still exists, and the ruined walls of the royal Safavid gardens of Hezar Jerib south of the city, 1, now the site of Isfahan University. The Maidan-i-Shah, 2, before civic pride turned the great space into

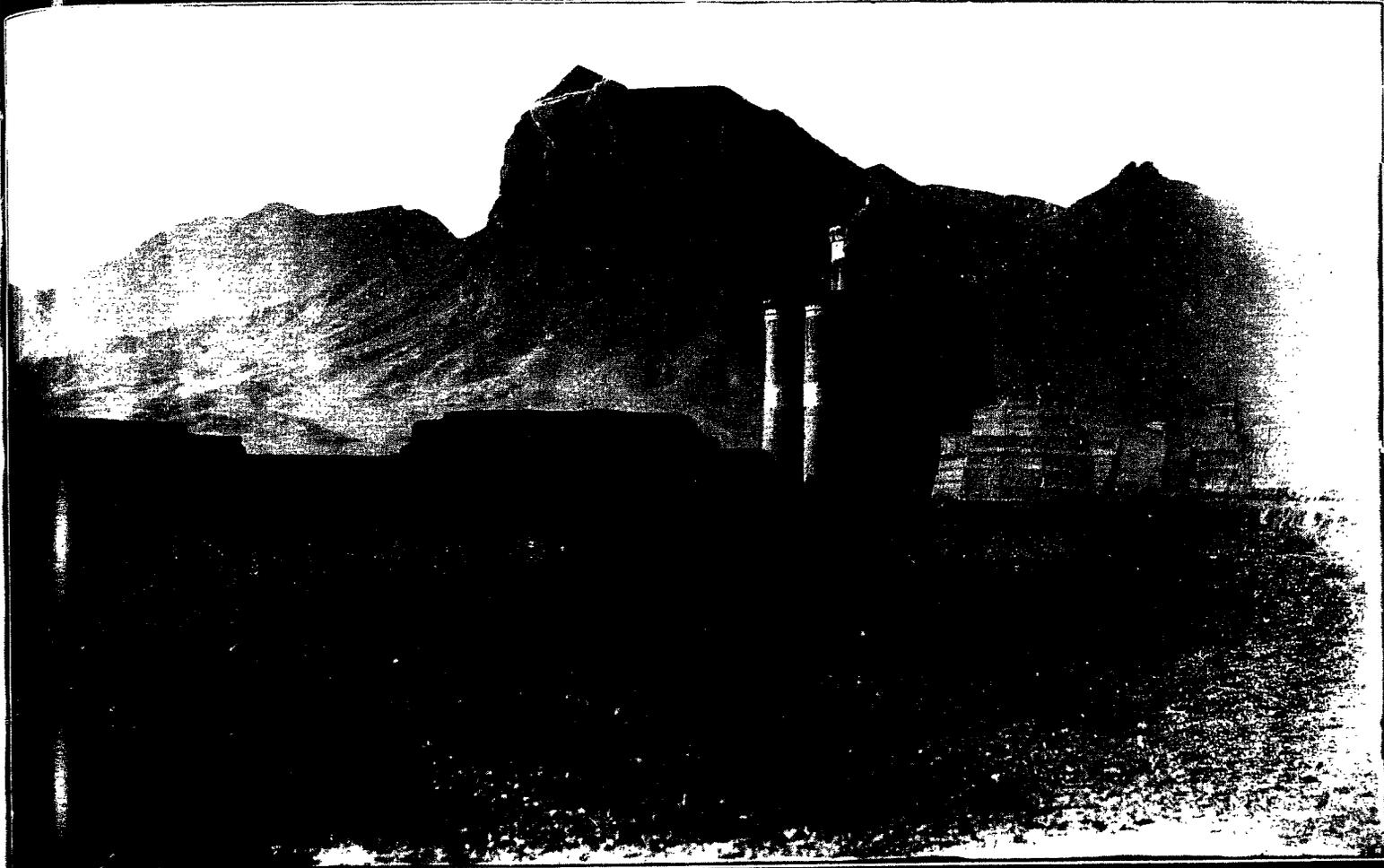
a European-type square with lawns and pools in the middle. The view is taken from the top of the entrance gate to the bazaar and shows the Shah Mosque and Ali-Qapu (right). An exhibition of Ernst Hoeltzer's photographs, 'Isfahan in Camera', will be on show at the Talbot Rice Art Centre, Edinburgh University (10 July-7 August) and at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (8 October-1 November).



#### Acknowledgments

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3, another photograph by Ernst Hoeltzer: the Madrasah of the Mother of the Shah seen from the Chahar Bagh, before the walled garden on the right was destroyed to make way for the new Shah Abbas Avenue.

4, the tailors' bazaar and, 5, the pleasure pavilion of Hasht Behesht (Eight Paradises), both from 'Monuments Modernes de la Perse'.

